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Opera Bufa: "*Divertimento Giocoso*[1]" or Coping with Absence?

Time, as a linear construction, tends to herd people into viewing their lives in terms of memory, present sensual stimulation, and hypothetical premonitions. The English language reflects this structure by allowing us to speak in various verbal tenses, and narratives that employ multiple temporal settings can transport the reader or auditor into emotional states contingent upon a temporal location designated by the author. We construct our perceptions of the world based not only on language, however but also on images that elicit emotional responses *and* generate new thoughts or ideas. Memory works in a similar way, by cataloguing images corresponding to one's emotional and physical state in the past, like a physical stamp on one's brain that tries, then, to translate it into words. Memory, which can take such a strong hold on one's perception, depends upon loss for its own creation, such that one must lose something in order to look back on in it memory. Poets have long been tackling the problem of forgetting and memory, coping with grief, mourning lost lovers or friends, and feeling out the concept of nostalgia through their work. In *Opera Bufa*, Adam Fieled builds an entire opera out of prose poems, weaving through it themes of sex, music, literature, and drugs, all of which become threads that attempt to explore this concept. His emotional release onto the page is a highly poetic form reduced to potent and poignant prose that describes losing as a means of artistic creation.

[1] Translated from Italian: playful entertainment; one classification of Opera Buffa. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opera_buffa>

Throughout Fieled's opera, he remembers past lovers and the loss of physical objects, but he continually highlights the arbitrariness of the "what" that is gone, profiting from a focus on the expression engendered by absence. Afterall, the first line of his poetic musical score reads, "Losing is the lugubriousness of Chopin." (5) By equating "losing" with an interpretation of Chopin's style he transforms the concept of absence into the great work of an infamous composer in six words. Fieled underscores the importance of what comes from the emotional reaction caused by deprivation rather than the object or feeling originally lost: "It is simply bereavement that leads us here, to these images." (16) Loss engenders these "images" that eventually lead to new thought, creating inventive juxtapositions and fresh concepts. He goes even further by drawing attention to his own creative process and his reconfiguration of mourning when he says,

> "What has been lost thus far? It's just tar on a highway, bound for ocean. Or, it's the migratory flight of a carrier pigeon. It is all things that move and breathe, coalesced into sound…It is octaves, repeated in a funhouse mirror until a decibel level is reached that a dog alone may hear. I am the dog that hears, the dog that conducts, the dog that puts bones on the table." (50)

In this citation, the poet refers to himself as the *ramasseur* of the fragmented pieces created by loss. He "conducts" the broken pieces into poetry to be put onto the table for the public to digest.

Furthermore, Fieled directly mentions memory, saying that it is "as sweet as reality" (59) and then relates the two of these to dreams. This statement disregards any difference between the past and the present in terms of experience and one's emotional state. His comparison to dreams, then, links them all together through their capacity to provoke strong emotional experiences and vivid imagery. However, he separates the dream world from the others by saying, "I have learned to what extent dreams are real.

They may not be solid as a cast-iron pot, but they are enough." (59) But *enough* for what exactly? Here Fieled suggests that dreams suffice as inspiration for artistic expression. A few, short lines after, he sums up this theory of creation in stating, "It is the hour of feeling, when singing must cease." (59) Here, "the hour of feeling" refers to the present, profiting from the woman he finds himself next to in order to experience the moment *as* the present. However, as he states himself, these privileged instances of living in the present moment exclude the possibility of creative release; during these moments, "singing must cease." In one of his other poems in which he references the power of imagination, he says, "I know that I had to dream an opera to really sing. I know I had to dream singing to really write." (54) The poet's creativity cultivated in this dream world derives directly from the concept of losing control. Once his subconscious eliminates all barriers constructed by reason or rationality, Fieled really starts to sing.

Opera Bufa bulges at the seams with drug references to describe an elimination of control. Cocaine and mescaline dispossess users of their governance over their own visual faculties, causing hallucinations and amplifying all external stimuli. This state of being induced by drugs parallels the dream state that Fieled exploits for tapping into new creativity. Drugs, however, grant extended access to this alternative existence in which one's subconscious yields to consciousness, whereas the dreamer forgoes all control involuntarily. Fieled references the prevalent drug culture of the psychedelic rock scene in San Francisco during the 1960's and 70's to infuse his poetry with this theme: "stay where shadows press themselves in upon you. Stay with the purple riders and their sage buttons." (16) This is the first drug allusion of Opera Bufa, and boldly opens the doors for others to follow. His mention of "purple riders" adorned with "sage buttons" points

directly to the band New Riders of the Purple Sage, a country rock band that emerged from this drug and music culture of California in 1969. The term "purple riders" describes users of a mildly hallucinogenic aromatic herb found in Southern California commonly used in Native American ceremonies. Though Fieled makes this insinuation early on in his work, he picks up the thread again towards the end when Maria Callas says to him, "We are all purple riders" as she slowly exhales a ribbon of smoke. Though the author also mentions the use of cocaine, this theme of hallucinogenic drugs is more tightly weaved into his story as he openly associates it with Maria Callas, one of the narrator's inspirations, his former lover, and the woman who performs his *Opera Bufa*.

In addition, the poet dissolves boundaries signifying binary opposition to destroy conventional associations and meaning. Many images created by Fieled seem cryptic, and the reader must often wrestle the sentence into some sort of submission from which he or she can draw any digestible meaning. For example, he says things such as, "The history of popcorn is a minor third that can be squelched by intense bed-thuds," (31) or "keep your pug-face for the aesthete tax collecting slobber-heads." (28) He also tests one's logic by using such hypothetical reasoning as, "If you were a cup of finished ice cream, I'd be a brown-eyed moon-goddess." (11) These lines disorient the reader and also reflect on Fieled's own state of mind during the creation process. In describing his own style, Fieled says, "As for fluorescence, those crayons were always my favorites anyway. If the color is off, it's because my set collapsed, if not into nullity, then into plurality." (54) He tears down the blatant contrasts separating nullity from plurality and life from death to create a space in between, seemingly void of sense and control, from which poetry and song spring forth in abundance. He says that "song cannot be spared

when life and death adhere," (56) and it is within this grey space that Fieled writes. Inside this space, in which everything seems arbitrary and undeterminable, people create new connections between words and images, create new meaning, and better understand themselves.

In losing control and sacrificing reason, Fieled actually *gains* control over his own creative style and the structure of his work. The opening sentence in which he mentions Chopin establishes the poet's theme and perspective that he will tease out during the fifty-nine poems to follow. He relies heavily on the concept of absence and its multiple contributions to the creative process in the first quarter of his opera before he enters into other themes. In his first poem, Fieled says,

> "What's lost might be a sea shell or a tea cup or the bloody scalp of an Indian; it hardly matters. When you are lost, the heart recedes from exterior currents, too much in sync with itself, its groove vicissitudes. Each encounter, rather than revealing new rhythms, is experienced as a clangorous din, a pounding…to push the heart deeper and deeper into pitiless darkness…We squirm within ourselves to the sound of the Devil's opera bufa." (5)

He disregards what sends him into this "pitiless darkness" to focus on the experience he lives once there. Fieled plants the seed of an idea that should slowly blossom in the reader's mind through their experience with his work and returns to the original concept in his final poems. Eight poems from the end, he begins an "inventory" of what is lost, of what remains, and of what has been gained. A few poems before that, he says, "What has been lost thus far? It's just tar on a highway, bound for ocean," (50) lines that provide deeper reflection upon an idea that was similarly stated in the first lines of his work. In using this structure, Fieled has created a strong thematic foundation that circles back on

itself, and he fills the middle with layers of relevant ideas, juxtaposed colors and images, and a stylized imagery presented in a simple, yet very rich and highly poetic style.

Opera Bufa outlines Adam Fieled's digestion of loss and memory that leads him into the grey space between nullity and plurality from which creation is born. His poetry explores hallucinogenic drugs, sexual promiscuity, and cryptic language play to *cope* with absence in a positive way. It is his artistic creation, his opera, his voice, his poetry; it is music that bleeds.